RESPONSIBLE

May 5, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 Corinthians 12:1-12
Matthew 25:14-30

"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance;..."
-Matthew 25:29 (NSRV)

> "For, to all those who have, more will be given and they will have an abundance."

The subject is not money but responsibility. The sentence could read, "to all who have much responsibility, more responsibility will be given, and they will have an abundance." They will also be very busy, Jesus might have added... For it is the iron law of voluntary organizations, is it not? Volunteer once, and you're caught; do a good job and your reward is another, bigger job. Open your mouth and offer an opinion on how the task might be accomplished, and you will be asked to do it; chair the committee, raise the money, organize the dinner, take out the trash - whatever. "Those who have, get more..." Responsibility.

Henry Copeland, President of the College of Wooster, began a fine convocation address on the topic by retelling Aesop's Fable, "Belling the Cat."

The mice lived in a state of perpetual fear because of the constant menace which hovered over their very existence. So they held a general meeting to discuss what measures they might take to outwit the enemy, the Cat.

A young mouse rose to speak:

> "You will all agree that our chief danger consists in the sly and treacherous manner in which the enemy approaches us. Now, if we could receive some signal of her approach, we could easily escape from her. I venture, therefore, to propose that a small bell be procured and attached by a ribbon around the neck of the cat. By this means we should always know when she was about and could easily retire while she was in the neighborhood.

"This proposal was met with general applause."

What a wonderful idea - brilliant - creative! But there is an unhappy ending.

A wise old mouse got up and said:

"That is all very well, but who is to bell the Cat?"

Nobody said a word. No one was willing to be responsible, to assume the very real risks involved in doing what needed to be done.

President Copeland's point, which got my attention, was that the very notion of responsibility has not fared well in our society. Rather, the "Me Decade," the "New Narcissism," told us we were entitled not to responsibility but to comfortability. "Do yourself a favor, take care of yourself, be your own best friend, you deserve a break today" became the litanies by which we live, a kind of narcotic, Copeland said, the flip side of which is "the politics of blame," i.e., whatever is going wrong must be somebody else's fault: big government, big business, big labor, big education. "They" are making a mess of things. It's all "their" fault.

The result is that individuals want to maintain a safe distance between themselves and their instituions, an intentional avoidance of the kind of public responsibility upon which those institutions are absolutely dependent: the college, museum, symphony orchestra, hospital, church.

The editor of a major urban daily newspaper calls it "the new cynicism." "As America mopes and the economy falls - we became snide and cynical." One way to measure the soul of a culture is to look at its popular entertainment. And this observer finds it overwhelmingly pessimistic and ugly, and we're buying it. "Hard Copy," "Unsolved Mysteries," "Goodfellas," which some people think was the best movie of the year, is about a mobster with no conscience in a world without rules, without punishment or regret for the rule-breakers, and without much hope for redemption. "Roseanne," he says, "cynically shows that we can't change the world, we can only scoff." [see Jeff Jarvis, in Context, April 15, 1991]

Change the world? Who Me? I suppose there aren't many of us who, deep in our heart of hearts, would not like to, if not change the course of history, at least to make a difference, in some way to contribute something to the well being of the planet and the human enterprise. And I don't suppose there are many of us who have not, over the years, come to terms with the reality that we can't do very much. We are not Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King or Jonas Salk or Albert Schweitzer. We are simply who we are and it takes most of our time and energy and strength just keeping body and soul together. And I don't suppose there are many of us who have not despaired just a bit about our impotence and in that impotence retreated from a sense of responsibility, cultivated a bit of that distance from our institutions, "what, after all," we reason, "can I possibly do?"

And in that tiny dynamic, which does not happen one day once-and-for all, but is a process, a slow retreat over the years, in that small dynamic there is a fatal moral flaw.

"The sin of respectable people," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "is running from responsibility." You know Bonhoeffer's story. I'm sure you have heard it many times: the German pastor who took a public stand against Naziism, eventually cast his lot with the resistance and joined with an assassination attempt against Adolph Hitler, was arrested in 1943 and executed in 1945 just before the end of the war. You know about Bonhoeffer the martyr. I was reminded recently of an earlier dimension of the story. I was attending a meeting at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. It was held in the recently renovated Bonhoeffer Room, named because Dietrich Bonhoeffer had lived there for a year. Pictures on the wall, letters and personal memorabilia reminded me that before he was a martyr, Bonhoeffer was an academician, a distinguished scholar. Before getting in trouble with the Nazis he was on the theological faculty at the University of Berlin. He came to New York and Union for a year in 1933. His academic specialty was Ethics.

And, for Bonhoeffer, the basis of Christian ethics was responsibility. Traditionally, Christian religion has flirted with the older, legalistic notion that the basis of ethics is the avoidance of the evil. Traditional religion emphasizes the "thou shalt nots" much more than "thou shalt." The current public flap about the Presbyterian report on human sexuality is a case in point. We are all being asked, "What are you Presbyterians up to now?" "Roll over John Calvin," Newsweek sneered. Allow me to remind you again that the document is the report of a Task Force and does not represent the position of the Presbyterian Church. The report suggests that sexual morality is far more than saying "no" and avoiding immorality. Many responsible people believe the report is flawed and that it will not be adopted by our General Assembly. But one thing it does, and that is suggest that you can avoid wrongdoing, and not even hear the distinctive Christian word about doing good.

Bonhoeffer, the Ethics scholar, taught that "personal experience of God's judgment and grace also included consciousness of a larger humanity to which we belong. Inescapably, there, the spiritual life includes attunement to and response to the social realm." [see Weavings, John Mogabgab, March/April 1990, p. 2-3] Translate that, "responsibility."

Bonhoeffer saw the tragic 20th century divorce between private and public discipleship, perhaps best, but not exclusively, illustrated by the people who found it possible to go to church on Sunday morning and on Monday go to work in their jobs in a concentration camp where thousands of people were being gassed. One of his biographers put it this way: "Bonhoeffer's fundamental view of ethics was that a Christian must accept his/her responsibility as a citizen of this world where God has placed him/her." [See Life Together, John W. Doberstein, p. 7-13]

What made Bonhoeffer a martyr was not a moment of impulsive heroism, but a carefully reasoned theological position. He had concluded that believing in Jesus made him a responsible citizen of this world.

The reminders are on the walls of the Bonhoeffer Room at Union Seminary. After his year of lecturing and study in 1933, he returned to Germany, got in trouble with the Nazis, became a parish pastor, helped organize an underground seminary, lectured and traveled. He returned to New York and Union in 1939 when it was becoming more and more clear that the world was headed for tragedy. His friends at Union - among them the great Reinhold Niehbuhr - arranged for him to remain, to teach, write, lecture until the war was over. They pled with him to stay. But his ethic of responsibility would not allow him. He was a German. It was his country. He would bear whatever his fellow Germans had to bear. He would be a responsible citizen. So he boarded one of the last ships to sail from New York to Germany and became a responsible participant in the most tragic moment in his country's history.

His faith had led him to pacifism. But his deeper sense of responsibility, as the foundation of ethics, convinced him to join the resistance and help plan a violent attempt to kill Hitler; this failed and resulted in his own imprisonment and execution.

Bonhoeffer's proposal - that Christian discipleship begins with responsible citizenship - is, I would propose, terribly important today, even more so than it was fifty years ago.

The topic of a responsible sexual ethic will not go away, unfortunately. If we know anything about the topic, it is that articulating the traditional moral maxims about sex may make us feel good, but will have absolutely no impact on the way people behave sexually. And, in fact, because of religion's refusal to be responsible, it may contribute - indeed does contribute - to an epidemic of unwanted pregnancies, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, child abuse and abandonment.

The kind of society we want to be - the kind of nation, state, city - continues to be before us, and is determined in the political arena as representatives struggle with the hard realities of money.

Someone has to balance the budget. The current proposal based on the very simple premise that you and I are already paying too many taxes, is to do that at the expense of poor people. And so 80% of the necessary 500-million-dollar reductions comes from services to the poor.

* 100,000 people on general assistance will be cut off next January.

* service for the medically indigent - like dental care, wheelchairs - will be eliminated.

* Medicaid will be further reduced, which the Illinois Hospital Association warns will "sound the death knoll for hospitals serving poor people," thirteen of which have already closed.

The people who are writing the best theology today are pleading for a renewal of morality, not in the traditional sense of saying "no" to

immorality, but an ethic of responsibility for the life of the whole world, responsibility for the existence of the planet, the integrity of the nation, the well-being of the city, the life of the church.

It is the nature of the topic to be difficult and controversial. "Belling the cat" is very risky business. To make matters worse there is a long and venerable tradition in this country that discipleship is a private matter, that religious faith is a matter between God and me and that there is and should be no connection between personal faith and public political behavior.

Bonhoeffer would disagree with that. So would the one who said "to all those who have, more will be given" and meant "responsibility."

This church is doing something important today. It is recognizing the centrality of the ethic of responsibility. By ordaining and installing thirty-nine members of the church as officers, we are celebrating the notion that believing in Jesus means responsible participation. These are the people who have agreed to "Bell the Cat" around here for three years or so.

The very notion that they should do this - that lay members, not solely clergy, bear responsibility for the life of the institutional church - is what makes us Presbyterian. 450 years ago it was a revolutionary notion. People fought and died for it, were thrown in prison and burned at the stake for it.

It is revolutionary still. It is a reminder to all of us that God calls us to be responsible; to be involved responsibly in the life of our society, the institutions we care about and our church. It is a reminder to all of us, whether we are officers installed today, or even if we've never been elected to anything, that believing in Jesus means living responsibly in the world God has given us, and that we, particularly we who have so much, citizens of this nation, this city, this neighborhood, particularly to us, the burden of responsibility is given. It is a reminder that God intends for us to be responsible and that we are fully human, fully alive, fully the men and women God created us to be - insofar as we assume the responsibility for the life God gives.

It was a moving and great moment last year when Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, addressed the United States Congress. He said:

> "The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart... in human responsibility... the only backbone to our actions, if they are to be moral - is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my firm, my country, my success - responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged." [See "Belling the Cat," Henry Copeland, The Wooster Review]

And so the matter rests finally in your heart and mine. No matter who you are - CEO of a major corporation, or simply the CEO of your own life - God's love for you and the world translates into responsibility. In Jesus Christ, God calls you to live fully in the world, to passionately love it, to be responsible for it. It is our burden and our glory.

Jesus said:

> "To all those who have, more will be given
> and they will have an abundance."

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Dear God, we thank you for this world, for our nation, our state, and our community. We thank you for our church and for all those institutions which serve us.

We thank you for making us responsible and giving us the gifts we need, the courage, patience and love to be your faithful people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.